WHEN WILL THE IGNORANCE END? *

Keynote Speech at the
National Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference

Washington, DC - October 13, 1979

by Audre Lorde

I wish to applaud every single one of you sitting here tonight. It is a wonderful and profound experience to see the row upon row of us gathered here, for we are the proof of the power of vision.

The ignorance will end when each one of us begins to seek out and trust the knowledge deep inside us, when we dare to go into that chaos which exists before understanding and come back with new tools for action and change. For it is from within that deep knowledge that our visions are fueled, and it is our vision which lays the groundwork for our actions, and for our future.

This conference is an affirmation of the power of vision. It is a triumph of vision to say the words, even, National Conference of Third World Lesbians and Gays. Thirty years ago, that was only possible in our dreams of what might someday come to pass. And yet, as we know, we have always been everywhere, haven't we? The power of vision nourishes us, encourages us to grow and to change, and to work toward a future which is not yet.

So I stand here as a 46 year old Black Lesbian Feminist warrior poet come to do my work as we have each come to do hers and his, - the tasks of joyfulness, of struggle, of community, and the work of redefining our joint power and goals, so that our younger people need never suffer in the isolation that so many of us have known. And while we are here, I ask that each of you remember the ghosts of those who came before us; that we carry within ourselves the memory of those lesbians and gay men within our communities whose power and knowledge we have been robbed of, those who will never be with us, and those who are not here now. Some of our sisters and brothers are not here because they did not survive our holocausts, nor live to see the day when there finally was a National Conference of Third World Lesbians and Gays.

Some are absent because they cannot be here because of external constraints, and for our sisters and brothers in prison, in mental institutions, in the grips of incapacitating handicaps and illnesses, I ask your attention and concern, which is another word for love.

But others are not here because they have lived a life so full of fear and isolation that they are no longer even able to reach out. They have lost their hope. And for every one of us here tonight, as we all know, there are many lesbians and gay men trapped by their fear into silence and invisibility, and they exist in a dim valley of terror wearing nooses of conformity. And for them, also, I ask your understanding. For as we know, Conformity is very seductive, as it is destructive, and can also be a terrible and painful prison.

So while we party tonight, let a little drop fall, call it a libation, which is an ancient african custom, for all our sisters and brothers who did not survive. For it is within the contexts of our past as well as our present and our future that we must re-define community.

In the affirmation of our coming together and the potential power of our numbers, remember how much work there is still to be done in our communities. In the present, vision must point the way toward action upon every level of our varied existences; the way we vote, the way we eat, the way we relate to each other, the way we raise our children, the way we work for change. This weekend we are here not only to share experience and connection, not only to discuss the many aspects of freedom for all homosexual peoples.. We are also here to examine our roles as powerful forces within our comminities. For not one of us will be free until we are all free, and until all members of our communities are free. So we are here to help shape a world where all people can flourish, beyond sexism, beyond racism, beyond ageism, beyond classism, and beyond homophobia. In order to do this, we must see ourselves within the context of a civilization that has notorious disrespect and loathing for any human value, for any human creativity or genuine human difference. And it is upon our ability to look honestly upon our differences, to see them as creative rather than devisive, that our future sucess may lie.

We are here as a conference of third world lesbians and gay men. That tells us what brings us together. There is a wonderful diversity of groups within this conference, and a wonderful diversity between us within those groups. That diversity can be a generative force, a source of energy fueling our visions of action for the future. We must not let diversity be used to tear us apart from each other, nor from our communities. This is the mistake they made about us. I do not want us to make it about ourselves.

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In this country, historically, all oppressed peoples have been taught to fear and despise any difference among ourselves,since difference had been used against us so cruelly. And we all know how particularly painful homophobia in our communities can be, since we also share a struggle with our homophobic sisters and brothers.

Therefore our moves for change should be illuminated by that knowledge, should implement those lessons which we have learned within the communities of which we are a part. And we must never forget those lessons; that we cannot separate our oppressions, nor yet are they the same. That not one of us is free until we are all free; and that any move for our dignity and freedom is a move also for our community sisters and brothers, whether or not they have the vision to see it. And between ourselves, difference must not be used to separate us, but to generate energy for social change at the same time as we preserve our individuality. And although we have been programmed to look upon each other with suspicion and with fear, (the old divide and conquer routine), we can move beyond that fear by learning to respect our visions of the future more than we respect our terrors of the past. And this cannot be done without strenous personal effort, and the sometimes painful scrutinies of change.

For make no mistake. Not only are our straight sisters and brothers, but we too have been taught to react to any difference with the killer instinct: destroy. I call it jugular vein psychology: "I don't like the way you act, so I'm going to eliminate you immediately." Well that is not going to work for us here. We are going to learn how to make our differences into power and fuel for vision and for change.

We have to ask ourselves some difficult questions here this weekend. For instance, what does real support mean in a consistently hostile environment? What does a genuinely non-sexist, non-racist culture require and imply. What does the responsibility of community mean? Does it mean only a trick handshake, the latest fashion in cruising clothes, the right to hold hands in the street? Or does it mean building genuine networks of support for each other and our communities, so that wherever, however, whenever we are functioning within this system which canabalizes our loves and our lives; whenever and however we function within this system, we work to bring about more humanity and more light for each other and for those, who like ourselves, have felt the keen edge of rejection? In this room now there is a significant amount of people-power for social change, and it must become conscious and useful power. That is the meaning of support and community.

As a black woman and a lesbian, I have lived without that support for most of my life, and I know what it has cost me and what it has cost many of you. And for me, it was only the consciousness, the vision, of a community somewhere, someday, -- - it was only my vision of the existence and possibility of what it is, in fact, here tonight, that helped to keep me sane. And sometimes not even that did. Now we have a chance to make that support for each other real.

I think we are all here because we are seeking a new kind of power; a force for change beyond the old forms which did not serve us. We are here because each of us believes in a future for ourselves and for those who come after us. We are redefining our power for a reason, and that reason is a future, and that future lies in our children and our young people. I'm speaking here not only about those children we may have mothered and fathered ourselves, but about all our children together, for they are our joint responsibility and our joint hope. They have a right to grow, free from the diseases of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and the terror of any difference. These children will take what we do and carry it on through their visions, and their visions will be different in turn from ours. But they need us as role-models, to know that they are not alone in daring to define themselves outside the approved structures. They need to know our triumphs, and our errors.

So this weekend, I ask that each of us make a committment to those children within our communities, to a future for them which will be free from oppression and abuse as well as starvation. I ask that in our planning and discussions we include the children in our future, and bring our insights and knowledge to bear so that they will not be tyrannized and ghettoized as we were. We must become actively involved with the ways in which the children of our communities are being socialized to accept the many forms of their own death, eating poison, reading poison, learning poison. For instance, where do our children learn the lessons of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and self-hate? What are our schools teaching our children?

What we dare to dream today we can work to make real tomorrow. Visions point the way to make the possible real.. 30 years ago, most of you sitting in this room could not eat a dish of icecream in a drugstore in Washington, D.C. because you were not white. The idea of this conference was an impossible dream. Now the future is ours, with vision and with work. And that work will not be easy, for those who fear our visions will try to keep them silent and invisible. But the ignorance

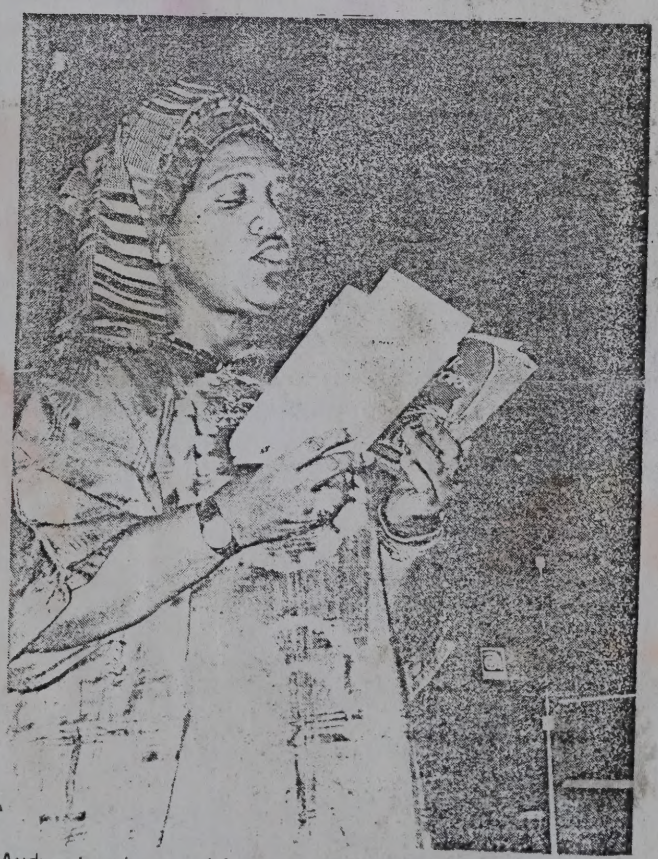
will end, when each of us is prepared to put ourselves upon the line to end it, within ourselves, and within our communities. That is real love, that is real power.

We stand as the last bulwark of humanity in an increasingly depersonalized and anti-human world. A search for acceptance within that world must never blind us to the need for genuine and far-reaching change. We must always ask ourselves, what kind of world do we really want to become a part of?

As lesbians and gay men, we have been the most despised, the most oppressed and the most spat upon people within our communities. AND we have survived. That survival is a testament to our strength. We have survived, and we have come together now to use that strength to implement a future; hopefully, a future that shall be free from the mistakes of our oppressors, as well as from our own. What we are doing here this weekend can help shape our tomorrows and a world.

We are going to turn that beat totally around.

by Audre Lorde



leigh mosley

Audre Lorde speaking at the 3rd World Lesbian and Gay conference

CONFERENCE RESOLUTIONS

A. FROM THE THIRD WORLD WOMEN'S CAUCUS

BE IT RESOLVED that the Third World Lesbian/Gay Conference strongly supports principled feminism (that feminism which addresses the needs of all women, including those of Third World Lesbians, rejecting the feminism of the NOW-type feminist movements as it does not address the needs of all Third World women), which addresses the oppression of all women, especially Third World Lesbians;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this Conference go on record in support of the promotion of the leadership of Third World Lesbians in defense of all our interests in the race, sex, sexuality and class struggles;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this Conference demand that the feminism, gay and Left-Wing movements rid themselves of their racism and sexism; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Third World Women's Caucus demands that white men and Third World men resolve to deal with feminism and racism in their communities.

B. FROM THE FREEDOM SOCIALIST PARTY and RADICAL WOMEN

BE IT RESOLVED that this Conference go on record demanding an end to all deportations of undocumented workers and calling for open borders with Mexico;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this Conference demand that the US government grant undocumented workers the same rights guaranteed documented workers, including the right to unionize and strike, the right to apply for legal resident status or US citizenship and the right to unemployment compensation, bilingual education and all available social services;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this Conference demand the complete dismantling of the Immigration and Naturalization Service police apparatus; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this Conference condemn the using of "illegal aliens", which is a racism and degrading term for undocumented workers who come to work in the United States without legal papers.

C. FROM THE IMMIGRATION WORKSHOP

WHEREAS immigration laws have traditionally been used by the US government to keep out certain classes of politically active people such as communists and anarchists, and for decades the laws have been used to exclude Asians;

WHEREAS the 1952 Immigration Act has been repeatedly used to harass and exclude from the US our Lesbian sisters and Gay brothers from abroad; and

WHEREAS many of our Third World Lesbian sisters and Gay brothers live in constant fear of harassment and deportation because of this McCarthy-era law;

BE IT RESOLVED that all concerned people and Lesbian and Gay organizations actively work to abolish this outrageous law;

BE IT RESOLVED that all concerned people and Lesbian and Gay organizations call on Congress to enact and approve legislation to repeal this law; and

BE IT RESOLVED that all concerned people and Lesbian and Gay organizations pledge their support for our international sisters and brothers who face this legal barrier to visiting and living in this country and to sharing in our common struggle.

D. FROM THE CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS FROM MEXICO

BE IT RESOLVED that the Conference demand that the Mexican government stop immediately the police repression and imprisonment of political activists, homosexuals and women accused of having abortions;

BE IT RESOLVED that the Conference go on record condemning the role of the Mexican mass media in perpetuating the genocide of Mexican women, Gays and Lesbians; and

BE IT RESOLVED that this Conference send a telegram, letter and petition to Lopez Portillo and other government heads, signed by all conference participants, demanding that the Mexican government immediately stop all police repression, imprisonment and genocide of Mexican citizens.

E. FROM THE LATIN AMERICAN LESBIAN AND GAY MEN'S CAUCUS

BE IT RESOLVED that we, the participants of the Third World Lesbian and Gay Men's Conference, stand united in denouncing any and all facets of sexism, racism, and homophobia and pledge to actively work against these forms of oppression inside and outside of our own geographical, philosophical and cultural communities.

F. FROM THE FREEDOM SOCIALIST PARTY and RADICAL WOMEN

BE IT RESOLVED that this Conference go on record in support of prisoners' rights to organize political, labor, religious, cultural and social groups; to have access to the media; to be supplied decent housing, food, health and psychiatric care; to compensation for lost property and violations of civil and human rights;

BE IT RESOLVED that this Conference go on record for prisoners' self-government and an end to all brutality, racism and sexual oppression in prisons; and

BE IT RESOLVED that this Conference go on record for community control of prisons by unionists, civil rights groups and families of prisoners.

G. FROM THE FREEDOM SOCIALIST PARTY and RADICAL WOMEN

BE IT RESOLVED that the National Third World Lesbian/Gay Conference go on record in support of the building of coalitions of Third World people, feminists, labor organizations, workers, gays, civil rights organizations, and radical groups to fight Right Wing attacks victimizing Third World people, all gays, women and working people.

H. FROM THE JEWISH CAUCUS

BE IT RESOLVED that we not let the power/media structures dictate a non-healable split between Jewish and black groups, but instead groups be encouraged to continue to work together for a common understanding of both our unities and our real differences.

I. FROM THE FREEDOM SOCIALIST PARTY and RADICAL WOMEN

BE IT RESOLVED that Congress grant immediate recognition of the sovereignty of Native American nations and their right to self-determination;

BE IT RESOLVED that Congress act to ensure the enforcement of all treaties signed with the Native American nations;

BE IT RESOLVED that Congress grant amnesty to all Native American political prisoners, including Leonard Peltier, and act to halt the murderous government attack on the people of the Pine Ridge reservation;

BE IT RESOLVED that the forced sterilization of Native American women be immediately halted; and

BE IT RESOLVED that the policy of placing Native American children in non-Native foster homes and institutions, or putting them up for adoption by non-Indian families, be halted immediately.

J. RESOLUTION TO CREATE THE LATIN-AMERICAN LESBIAN-GAY MEN COALITION

We, The Latin American Lesbian and Gay Men's Caucus, propose the organization of a Latin American Lesbian and Gay Men's Coalition. (Co-Alicion LatinoAmericana de Lesbianas y Homosexuales.)

The C.L.L.H. purpose is to facilitate communication and support among the coalition members and to accelerate our day of liberation.

The C.L.L.H. membership is open to Latinamerican gay men-lesbian organizations and individuals that actively fight against class, sexist and racist oppression expressed through social margination, employment discrimination verbal, sexual and physical aggression and police persecution that Latin American lesbians and gay men experience in everyday life. Because of the universal character of our oppression, the liberation army of Latin American lesbians and gay men are found all around the world, therefore, our membership is not restricted to any geographical location.

The C.L.L.H. adopts the following as the guiding philosophical principles:

A. As Latin American lesbians and gay men, we recognize the unique characteristics of our struggle for liberation. We will not subordinate our struggle for liberation from the discrimination we experience to other struggles or other organizations.

B. We also understand and visualize our struggle as part of a world wide struggle that has been undertaken by women, the working class, agricultural workers, minority groups, oppressed nationalities and students against the present system.

C. We will support and cooperate with progressive organizations and movements that work for the erradication of racism, sexism, class oppression and homophobia from society and nations.

D. We will confront progressive organizations and movements that harbor contradictions by exhibiting sexist, racist, class exploitation and homophobic attitudes and practices.

E. We will press for explicit statements and programs from progressive organizations and movements that will incorporate the unique concerns we have as Latin American lesbian and gay men.

We propose that by adopting the statements listed above , we the Latin Lesbian Gay Caucus of the First National Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference constitute ourselves as the founders of the Latin American Lesbian & Gay Men's Coalition.

BE IT RESOLVED that the Third World Conference participants recognize that we are involved in the struggle that the Latin American Lesbians and Gay Men's Coalition is waging, it is a part of our struggle, we are connected to it and committed to struggle with you to end our common oppression. We are with you.

K. BE IT RESOLVED THAT we, the participants of the Third World National Lesbian and Gay Men's Conference, stand united in denouncing any and all facets of sexism, racism, ageism, and class exploitation and hereby pledge to actively work against these forms of oppression inside and outside of our own geographical, philosophical and cultural communities.

L. FROM NATIONAL COALITION OF BLACK GAYS (NCBG)

WHEREAS we as Third World persons and organizations are as equally affronted and oppressed by racism, sexism, classism, and ageism, as we are by discrimination on the basis of affectional preference,

BE IT RESOLVED that we will endeavor to pursue equally the elimination of all these forms of oppression within the gay community and in the community at large. One form of oppression is to be regarded as no less or more important than another form...we will not overcome the oppression of lesbians and gays until racism, sexism, classism, and ageism are fully eliminated...

M. FROM NATIONAL COALITION OF BLACK GAYS

BE IT RESOLVED that each third world lesbian/gay group (American Indian, Asian, Black, Latin) create a national political and service network by, among, and between themselves. Those four national networks would focus on national issues, would disseminate information to organizations and individuals within their ethnic network, would...

N. FROM NATIONAL COALITION OF BLACK GAYS

BE IT RESOLVED that reasonable timetables and scheduling be established for:

a) the coming together of third world regional and state conferences (TBA);

b) the coming together of regional and state ethnic (Black, Latin, American Indian, Asian) conferences (TBA);

c) the coming together of the Second National Third World Lesbian/Gay Conference (18 months hence to grant ample time for "a" and "b" above); ...

O. FROM NATIONAL COALITION OF BLACK GAYS

BE IT RESOLVED that this, the first National Third World Lesbian/Gay Conference, adopts the map of the continental United States with profiles of Third World individuals facing the λ -- as depicted on the first Conference Program, T-shirt, banner and poster -- as its official logo.